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AUTHOR Simonite, Vanessa
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INSTITUTION National Children's Bureau, London (England).
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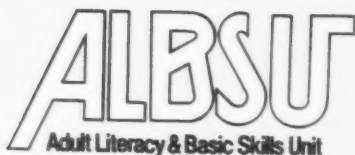
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ABSTRACT

In 1981, some 12,500 British 23-year-olds were interviewed in a survey carried out by the National Children's Bureau as part of an ongoing longitudinal study. A small part of each interview dealt with the respondent's experience of literacy and numeracy problems. Results demonstrated that a substantial number of the young adults had experienced problems relating to basic skills since leaving school. Ten percent reported literacy problems since leaving school; five percent reported numeracy problems. One-fifth of those with problems said that lack of basic skills had actually prevented them from achieving some goal during the period covered by the survey. (The questions that were asked are appended.) (YLB)

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LITERACY & NUMERACY

Evidence from the National Child Development Study

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FOREWORD

Perhaps one of the major factors in the initial success of the adult literacy campaign in the United Kingdom was the predominance given to the size of the problem. That two million people had significant difficulty with reading and writing took literacy work from a little known quite insignificant area of educational concern and transformed it into an issue of considerable importance for central and local government despite the fact that the statistical evidence was based almost totally on educated guesswork.

This Report prepared by the National Children's Bureau takes our knowledge about the number of adults with literacy difficulties a stage further and is, therefore, worthy of a wide circulation. The Report contains information taken from a longitudinal study of people born in the week 3-9 of March 1958 and indicates that among this group rather more than the 6% estimate which produced the figure of two million have some problems with reading and writing.

ALBSU and the National Children's Bureau have been particularly pleased to be able to co-operate in the production of this Report. Moreover, it is perhaps an indication of the importance of this topic that these are the first results to be published based on the latest stage of the National Child Development Study.

We are particularly grateful to Vanessa Simonite, a member of the National Child Development Study research team at the National Children's Bureau for the preparation and writing of this important Report and to her colleagues for their suggestions and comments.

*Ron Davie
Director
National Children's
Bureau*

*Alan Wells
Director
Adult Literacy and
Basic Skills Unit*

In 1981, some 12,500 British twenty-three year olds were interviewed in a survey carried out by the National Children's Bureau. A small part of each interview dealt with the respondent's experience of literacy and numeracy problems. Answers to these questions showed:

- one in ten of those interviewed reported problems with reading, writing or spelling since leaving school
- one in twenty of those interviewed reported problems with number work since leaving school.

THE SURVEY

The survey of twenty-three year olds from which the results presented here are drawn, was sponsored by a consortium of five government departments* and carried out by the National Children's Bureau. This survey was the fourth occasion on which the members of the National Child Development Study have been studied, and the first in adulthood.

The National Child Development Study is a longitudinal study which takes as its subjects all those who were born in the week 3rd - 9th March 1958, and who are now resident in England, Scotland and Wales. It has its origins in the Perinatal Mortality Survey, sponsored by the National Birthday Trust Fund, which was designed to examine the social and obstetric factors associated with stillbirth and death in early infancy among the 17,000 children born in Great Britain in that one week. Since 1964, the National Children's Bureau has sought to

*Department of Health and Social Security, Department of Education and Science, Manpower Services Commission, Department of Employment, Department of the Environment.

monitor the physical, educational and social development of the surviving members of the original study. To this end they were traced at the ages of 7, 11 and 16.

The recent survey has made it possible to look at the economic, family and health circumstances of this representative group of young adults at the age of 23. Respondents were interviewed in their own homes, with interviews designed to last an average of one and a half hours. Within the very wide scope of the survey, it was possible to include a small number of questions about the study members' experience of literacy and numeracy since leaving school. As the study members were among the first to reach the age of 16 after the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA), the period covered by these questions is at most 7 years.

The exact form of words used to collect information about the respondent's literacy and numeracy skills is given in the Appendix.

LITERACY PROBLEMS

- 10% of those interviewed reported some problems with reading, writing or spelling since leaving school.

Problems with reading were reported by 4% of the sample, and the majority of these people had also reported problems with spelling or writing. 6% of the sample had had problems only with spelling or writing since leaving school.

Men were more likely than women to report literacy problems of some kind since leaving school; 12% of men, compared to 7% of women had had such problems.

- 29% of those who reported having literacy problems since leaving school said these caused difficulties in everyday life.

Further examination of these responses showed that problems with reading were twice as likely to mean the respondent now had difficulties in everyday life as problems with only spelling or writing. 43% of those with reading problems compared to 20% of those with only spelling or writing problems said these caused everyday difficulties.

Men and women were equally likely to say that the literacy problems they had experienced since leaving school now caused difficulties in everyday life. When those who reported everyday difficulties were questioned about the kinds of things they found difficult, forms and letters were mentioned most frequently as causing problems, and many people questioned said that problems arose in the process of looking for and applying for jobs.

- only 8% of those who reported having literacy problems since leaving school had attended classes or courses to improve their reading or writing.
- out of those whose literacy problems now caused everyday difficulties, only 15% had attended classes or courses for help.

The proportion who had been to classes or courses was highest amongst those who said their everyday life was made difficult by problems with reading; but still only one in five of these had received help.

- only one in ten men and one in twenty women reporting literacy problems since leaving school had attended classes or courses to improve their literacy skills.

This striking difference between the sexes does not appear to vary according to the impact of poor literacy skills; since amongst those who said that literacy problems caused difficulties in everyday life, women were still only half as likely as men to have attended classes or courses for help.

NUMERACY PROBLEMS

- 5% of those interviewed reported problems with number work since leaving school.
- 27% of those who reported such problems since leaving school said these now caused everyday difficulties.

Problems with number work were reported by a smaller percentage of the sample than problems with reading, writing or spelling. Unlike literacy, problems with number work were reported equally often amongst men and women.

- one in ten men and one in forty women who had had problems with number work since leaving school had been to classes for help.

Again, there is a striking difference between the sexes in class attendance, with men who reported numeracy problems being four times as likely as women to have been to classes. No information about the kind of classes attended was obtained so the extent to which Adult Numeracy Schemes accounted for the help received is unknown. It may be that many such classes attended were provided within training schemes given either within jobs or to provide access to particular kinds of jobs. This may particularly explain the dramatic difference between men and women in the proportion attending classes, since, outside of jobs which involve dealing with cash, many 'traditionally male' jobs demand levels of numeracy not required by 'traditionally female' jobs. It is possible therefore that the increased difference in class attendance between the sexes for classes relating to number work is explained by work-related factors.

One feature of the information collected is that it provides information on people's experience of both literacy and numeracy problems. In particular we are able to see whether those with literacy problems are the same people as those with numeracy problems. The survey data shows that problems with number work occur more frequently amongst those who have experienced literacy problems since leaving school than amongst the sample as a whole. Nevertheless, four out of five people who had had literacy problems had not had any problems with number work during the period covered by the survey. Thus we see that the majority of those with poor literacy skills are not lacking in numeracy skills.

IMPACT OF POOR BASIC SKILLS

- 14% of the sample reported some problems with reading, writing, spelling or number work since leaving school.

As well as the information about the impact of such problems on everyday life, respondents with some literacy and/or numeracy problems were also asked whether lack of skills *prevented* them from doing something in particular that they would like to do. This question was designed to discover the extent to which poor basic skills, in addition to creating difficulties in everyday life, can pose a real barrier to some desired activity or achievement. It should be remembered that answers to this question will be particularly influenced by the respondent's individual circumstances at the time of interview. We must expect that as the respondent's career, family or housing circumstances or aspirations change, so more of those with poor basic skills will find that their lack of skills does become a barrier to some new goal.

- at the age of 23, one in five of those with problems said that lack of literacy or numeracy skills prevented them from doing something they would like to do.

Men and women were equally likely to say that lack of literacy or numeracy skills affected their life in this way. When questioned about what it was they were prevented from doing, the overwhelming majority of answers were work-related – finding work, finding a better job, getting promotion, or being able to do work-related training or education courses.

It is not surprising that work should be mentioned so frequently. Firstly, the current level of unemployment and increased competition for jobs will inevitably have most impact on those with poor basic skills. Secondly, while individuals can find help from family, friends or others to cope with demands placed on their skills outside the workplace, in applying for jobs the individual is judged on their own skills. Once in a job, dealing with problems by seeking help from colleagues may be an unacceptable solution either from the point of view of the individual or that of his or her employer.

CONCLUSIONS

Results given here are based on interviews with a very large national sample of twenty-three year olds. The survey employed no objective definition of a level of literacy or numeracy skills which might be used to define a "sub-literate" or "sub-numerate" adult, because it was felt that, in adult life, it is the individual's assessment of their own basic skills relative to the demands placed on them by their own life that is most relevant.

The results clearly demonstrate that a substantial number of the young adults interviewed had experienced problems relating to basic skills since leaving school; 10% reported literacy problems since leaving school; 5% reported numeracy problems since leaving school; and a fifth of those with problems said lack of basic skills had actually prevented them from achieving some goal during the period covered by the survey. Because of the lack of evidence about the literacy and numeracy skills of the adult population of Great Britain as a whole, we cannot be sure whether 23 year olds are representative of other ages in this respect. A recent Gallup study commissioned by ACACE which tested the numeracy skills of a sample of all ages found young adults to be the most able group. This suggests that, in the adult population at large, numeracy problems are even more commonly found than within our sample of twenty-three years olds.

With regard to literacy, there is even less real evidence. A national figure of "2 million functionally illiterate" adults is quoted widely, which corresponds to about 6% of the adult population as a whole. The results of this survey, however, show that as many as 10% of twenty-three year olds had had some literacy problems since leaving school. There is little reason to suppose that the literacy skills of these young adults are worse than those of older age groups. Hence, the evidence from the National Child Development Study suggests that there may be considerably more than 2 million adults in Great Britain whose literacy skills are not sufficient to meet the demands placed on them.

Some of the most striking results to emerge are those showing how few of these young people and especially how few young women, with

literacy or numeracy problems had attended classes which might have helped. This is another area in which information about adults of all ages with literacy or numeracy problems is lacking. Without more evidence, it is not clear whether the low attendance figures are typical of all ages or whether they reflect a greater reluctance to "return to the classroom" in the first years after leaving school. Further work is also needed to see whether class attendance is related to the individual circumstances of those with literacy or numeracy problems and to attempt to explain the exceptionally low rate of class attendance amongst women who are lacking in basic skills.

APPENDIX

THE LITERACY AND NUMERACY QUESTIONS ASKED

1. As you probably know, thousands of adults have difficulties with reading or writing at one time or another. It would help us if you could answer some questions about your own experience of reading and writing.
 - a. Since leaving school have you had problems with reading?
 - b. Since leaving school have you had problems with writing or spelling?

Those who answered 'Yes' to either question 1a or question 1b were then asked:

2. Do these problems now make anything difficult for you in everyday life? What things in particular are made difficult for you?

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3. Since leaving school have you had problems with number work or basic maths?

Those who answered 'Yes' to question 3 were then asked:

4. Do these problems now make anything difficult for you in your everyday life? What things in particular are made difficult for you?
-

People who had had any problems with reading, writing, spelling or number work since leaving school (ie. who answered 'Yes' to either Q1 or Q3 above) were then asked:

5. Is there anything that you would like to do that you feel lack of reading or number skills prevents you from doing? What things in particular are you prevented from doing?
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6. I would now like to ask you about any classes or courses you have done since leaving school which did not lead to formal educational qualifications. I am interested in *any* courses you have done - evening classes, courses you have followed on television, courses organised by Trade Unions and so on. Since leaving school, have you ever taken any courses or classes to

- a. get better at reading or writing?
- b. get better at figures or arithmetic?

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Available from:
Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit,
Kingsbourne House, 229/231 High Holborn,
London WC1V 7DA
Telephone: 01-405 4017

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Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit